

# CHAPTER 1

I've always loved history. While other boys hit home runs and memorised baseball players' batting averages, I studied the emperors of Rome. I wrote their names and the dates of their reigns on 3×5 cards. By age ten, I could recite them all: Tiberius 14–37 AD, Caligula 37–41 AD, and so forth. I finished reading the eighth and last volume of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* on homecoming night in high school – no quarterback or cheerleader could have made that claim. My parents were not impressed, though. They never are.

Even now, dates pop into my head out of nowhere: 1588, the defeat of the Spanish Armada; 1066, the Battle of Hastings; July 2, 1881, the assassination of President James Garfield.

History remains my obsession, but it's never made sense to me. I fail to see the plan, divine or otherwise. Why don't we learn from history? After two world wars, the United States and the Soviet Union keep rattling their nuclear sabres. We suffer from a stubborn inability to improve on the past.

For the moment, however, my historical gloom has receded. Robert Mugabe, elected on March 4, 1980 to head the government of the tiny country of Zimbabwe, has given the world new hope. He's more forgiving than Mother Teresa, as single-minded as Martin Luther King or the Dalai Lama.

A few months ago I'd never heard of Mugabe. Today his presence dominates my office. His profound wisdom sings to me in Old English lettering that took six hours to paint on my wall:

It could never be a correct justification that because whites oppressed us yesterday when they had power, the blacks must oppress them today because they have power. An evil remains an evil whether practised by whites against blacks or blacks against whites. Democracy is never mob rule.

These are the words of a man who triumphed after ten years in a colonial prison. The white authorities tortured him, hooking his genitals to an electric current and rendering him sterile. Once they released him, they made three attempts on his life. Now he forgives them.

I choose my heroes carefully.

On this wintry day in 1981, I am sitting in my small office at Wisconsin State University. My desk has become a storage house for a collection of 1 527 index cards containing facts and figures about Zimbabwe. Since this country's name is so long, I've abbreviated it to LOF in my notes – Land of Forgiveness.

I typed all the 3×5 cards myself. They're colour coded – blue for biography, green for geographical topics, yellow for events. Some, like Chinhoyi, have dual categories – it's a place and an event. 'Chinhoyi – city in northwest LOF, site of first battle of liberation war, 1966; formerly called Sinoia.'

I'm not ashamed to admit it. Mugabe and his LOF are taking over my life. I suspect he'll win the Nobel Peace Prize. No one deserves it more than he does.

I've made a decision. I'm going to Zimbabwe to chase my dream. I will write the definitive history of Zimbabwe's struggle for liberation and reconciliation. Robert Mugabe will be the hero of my story. John Peterson, my African History professor, will supervise.

I'm reading *Green Eggs and Ham* to my daughter Hilary. She's five and giggles like I'm tickling her tummy every time I recite the refrain. Dr Seuss is perfect for diverting her attention from my departure.

Dr Seuss is my line of communication to her, the only tool, short of candy and ice-cream, with which I can reach her. The chasm between us is of my creation. I'm running away from it. If I have been only an occasional visitor in her life to date, I will now be an even more distant, less frequent, presence. My dream has no meaning for my daughter Hilary or Janet, her mother. I've abandoned Janet before. When she became pregnant I tried to deny responsibility, then just fled. I saw Hilary for the first time when she was three months old. To my shame, I never changed her diaper or fed mashed carrots into her toothless mouth. I wasn't there when she took her first steps or waited for the fairy after losing that first tooth. I'll miss many more milestones as I attempt to make sense of my world of ideas.

As I leave, I promise birthday greetings and postcards of elephants, plus the occasional phone call. Janet, small and tight-lipped, knows better than to expect anything. Hilary has no concept of 8 000 miles or two years. She probably won't recognise me the next time we meet or may not

want to if she does. I will live with all that somehow, like so many men who find things they think are more important in life than fatherhood.

Less conflicted is my cursory farewell dinner at my parents' house in South Milwaukee. They respond to what they see as my 'bad decisions' with resolution and faith. They pray for me as I set off for what to them is a godforsaken and dark continent. 'There are pagans there,' my mother says.

I don't try to argue and don't promise any postcards. Since their conversion this is how it's been.

No one comes to the airport to bid me farewell. I check my backpack and a battered brown leather suitcase with the silver letters DB on it. Someone at the Goodwill, where I bought it, must have reversed my initials. My business cards show that I'm Ben Dabney, PhD researcher at Wisconsin State University. That brown suitcase holds my collection of 3x5 cards. I've wrapped them in bundles of a hundred and stuffed each bundle inside a sock.

I carry my most prized possession on board: a Hermes Rocket portable typewriter in its grey metal case. Peterson says typewriters are expensive in Zimbabwe. My jacket pocket contains a list of 73 people to interview.

According to my ticket, my destination is Salisbury, Rhodesia. I know I'm going to Harare, the liberated name of the capital of the liberated nation of Zimbabwe. Rhodesia is dead.

My journey is about more than history. Mugabe's gospel of reconciliation will help me reconcile the ruined relationships of my life.

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